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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

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SUBJECT: "FIRELESS COOKERS." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

★ JUN 8 1942 ★
U. S. Department of Agriculture

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Today I have some notes about one particular kind of wartime cooking--the kind you do with a fireless cooker. I call it wartime cooking--because we haven't heard much about fireless cookers since the last war. Then they were pretty popular.

There aren't a whole lot of fireless cookers in use right now. But they do offer a number of possibilities for canteen cooks and for busy homemakers. Furthermore, fireless cookers are easy to make -- inexpensively.

According to home economists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, you can make a family-sized cooker yourself--out of materials you have on hand or can buy cheaply. These home economists have worked out a set of directions for making fireless cookers. You can get these directions free from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

In case you're not familiar with the way a fireless cooker works--here's a bit of explanation from the home economists.

They say that a fireless cooker is nothing but a well-insulated box--that keeps the heat in, the cold air out. You put food in the box hot. It is kept hot by the insulation--and usually plus the addition of heated stones.

If you only want to keep food warm for a time, the insulation is enough. But if you want to cook the food in the fireless cooker, you use stones that hold the heat well. You heat these stones on your cook stove first--then put them in the cooker.

Directions worked out at the Bureau of Home Economics for making a fireless

cooker suggest a large can such as a 100-pound lard can for the outside of the cooker--with a smaller can to fit inside. Between these two cans goes a layer of insulation. If you use heated stones in the cooker, this insulation has to be fire-proof--a material such as rock wool for instance.

On top of the inside can is a thick cushion stuffed with this same insulating material. And inside the inside can go the heated blocks of soapstone or concrete to provide the heat for cooking.

That's the way a fireless cooker looks and works. Here are a few of the dishes you can make it in.

Fireless cookers are best suited to dishes that need long, slow cooking--and for those that haven't too stringent deadlines for taking food from the fire. That is, if ten minutes of overcooking would spoil a dish that you made on the stove--you couldn't make it in a fireless cooker. You just can't control the heat and the time that accurately.

Among the dishes that can be made successfully in such a cooker are baked beans--soups--and stews. Also, you can cook less tender cuts of meat--cereals--dried fruits--dried vegetables--and even steamed puddings and breads in your fireless cooker.

Of course--you wouldn't expect to be able to bake pies or cakes or anything that needs a high dry quick heat in such a cooker.

The length of time it takes to complete various dishes in the fireless cooker depends upon your particular cooker. And the only way to find out suitable times for each dish is to experiment yourself.

However, here are a few general pointers on using any fireless cooker.

You'll find that you'll need less liquid in making dishes in a fireless cooker than you would in the same dish made on the stove. That's because there isn't so much liquid evaporating in the closed dishes inside the closed cooker.

Always be sure food is boiling before it goes into the cooker. And if you open the cooker before the food is cooked completely--reheat the food to boiling before you put it back.

Be extremely careful about leaving food in the cooker for too long a time. It should always come out of the cooker piping hot. Remember there are a number of dishes that can become sources of dangerous food poisoning if you leave them long at lukewarm temperatures.

The time you leave food in the cooker will also depend somewhat on the kind and the size of the heating blocks you have. A stone will be hot enough to put in the cooker when a pinch of flour sprinkled evenly on the top browns in about 15 seconds--1 quarter of a minute.

Fireless cookers may save your fuel--or they may not. It depends on the kind of fuel you use. If you have a coal or a wood range for cooking--you probably do save fuel because you can heat up the food and the heating stones for the cooker while you are cooking something else on the stove. But if you use gas or electricity it's almost as cheap to cook the food on the stove as in the fireless cooker.

The biggest reason for the existence of fireless cookers is that they let the cook get out of the kitchen and out of the house while a slow-cooking dish gets done. A properly made fireless cooker won't need any attention once the food is put in it --and is not a fire hazard. Fireless cookers are useful in canteen cookery to keep food warm when it is cooked one place and served another.

If you are interested in making a family-sized fireless cooker, you may get free directions for making one by writing to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Ask for their publication called "Homemade Fireless Cookers."

